

Understanding

What do voodoo priests have against chickens? What have chickens ever done to cause harm to voodoo priests? Is there some forgotten piece of history where chickens ruled the world and voodoo priests were their slaves? Were there vast chicken empires in a whole world of chicken culture, chicken science, chicken technology? Is the chicken sacrifice an act of revenge or an attempt to crossover back into Chicken World? Was it somehow a happier place? Did the priests enjoy their lives of slavery to their chicken masters? Do they want to go back there?

I know nothing. I study the epistemology of the void between my ears.

Somewhere between 500 BC and 500 AD Peruvians created gigantic pictures by carving gigantic lines into the Nazca Desert. These pictures can only be seen by London taxi drivers flying overhead in their astral forms. This is the secret knowledge.

When I was in primary school I was treated like a little professor, a genius, a prodigy. When I got to secondary school I was treated like a complete idiot, a moron, a know-nothing. Something had changed and I didn't know what it was.

I had always been ahead of all the other kids in my village when it came to reading, writing and arithmetic. Reaching the age of thirteen was somehow different. Boys and girls were reacting differently to each other and I didn't know why. Suddenly I was the slow one. As a good boy who went to Sunday School I never liked dirty jokes or those "Carry On Film" double entendres. The whole nudging, nodding and winking thing always seemed a bit nasty, unpleasant and stupid to me.

Of course, a lot of it went over my head anyway. I used to listen to "Round the Horne", a comedy show on the radio which was absolutely full of double entendres and I simply didn't "get" most of them. I thought it was funny because of characters talking in funny voices and saying silly things which didn't make any sense. That was my whole concept of comedy in those days. I thought it was all about not making any sense. The rude bits had to be really obvious ones (like "Gruntfuttock") for me to even notice them.

Now, these days it would be different. In 21st Century Britain my combination of cleverness in academic subjects with misunderstanding of social communication would be recognised as being in the "autistic spectrum". But in the 1960s I was labelled variously as stupid, lazy or weird.

When I was 19 I began writing a book in collaboration with my friend Jim Baggins and, after a few months, I think he began to get extremely irritated by the fact that I didn't seem to know anything. I can see this in retrospect but, at the time, I wouldn't have understood what the problem was.

A little bit before my 24th birthday I had a nervous breakdown.

Part of the breakdown was about other people being able to communicate in ways that I couldn't understand. I didn't know what was going on. Everywhere I went people seemed to be doing a sort of Monty Python "nudge nudge wink wink" routine which enabled them to share knowledge in ways which I couldn't seem to grasp. Briefly I went through the paranoid delusion that everyone else was able to read minds and that I was the only one who lacked the telepathic ability.

When I calmed down a bit and rationalised it I began to realise that I was using words in a denotational form and other people were using words both **denotationally** and **connotationally**. So other people were not only using words to refer to things but also choosing words which implied meanings. This was the thing which I didn't "get" when I was in secondary school and which caused me to be viewed as an idiot even though I was displaying signs of genius in straightforward comprehension of books and algebra. Some years later, in the 1990s, I sat for a Mensa IQ test and was measured to have an IQ of 160. Higher than 99% of the population.

The IQ test measures the intelligence of pattern recognition, not the intelligence of social instinct.

In the 1970s, though, I was still struggling to understand what it was that everybody else seemed to know. I was clever but I was obviously not clever. I could see and know and understand things which were unknown to people around me but they had the ability to use words in ways of which I was only just becoming aware.

I tried asking people about it. They were not comfortable with the subject. They rejected any discussion of it. They said things like "I don't know WHAT you're talking about!!!" (in a deeply insulted tone of voice) and, in a sarcastic tone, "Do you want me to TELL you?" They would walk away angrily upset that I had asked them what it meant when someone used the word "not" in a particular context or the word "all" in certain ways. The more people I asked, the angrier the rejections became.

I had the definite impression that the subject I was asking about was contained within the pocket of some kind of cultural taboo. A thing which each person was supposed to somehow "know" instinctively without being told. In fact the very idea of "telling" me seemed to offend some unspoken moral code of which I had previously been unaware.

I began to compile lists of words and phrases. I had a great many pieces of paper upon which I had written columns of these language signifiers and, in the adjacent column, the subject or context in which they were used.

One column contained words like all, everything, whole, perfect, not, nothing, anything, something, change, different, the same, back, front, inside, outside, form, shape, structure, function, go, stop, time, space, mystery, do, don't, job, full, empty, love, hate, knowledge, understanding, hot, cold, good, bad, etc.

Another column included words like physics, mathematics, weather, science, poetry, writing, art, psychology, sex, painting, travel, engineering, anthropology, dance, police, school, learning, music, religion, magic, nature, etc.

Every day I tried to puzzle out how people were using these words. **Connoting** rather than **denoting**. Implying rather than indicating. Many of them became very clear to me but the big puzzle which was hardest to understand was WHY? Why did they do this strange thing? What was the PURPOSE of it? It seemed to me to be an unnecessary complication in life. Why would people make their lives so complicated and difficult?

I began to think that this connotational way of thinking wasn't difficult for them, it was only difficult for me. There was something different about the way their brains worked and they were in the majority. I, and any other possible people who might think in the way I did, had a different type of brain. I didn't know whether there were any other people who thought like me.

It had become clear to me that the connotational usage of words was something which other people did instinctively and it came naturally to them. Therefore I must have different instincts. I had already begun to suspect that my instincts were different after trying and trying and trying to learn to swim. I had tried jumping into the swimming bath and swimming, stepping into the swimming bath and swimming, holding onto the rail at the side and swimming, holding onto another person and swimming, holding my breath and crouching down under the water and then jumping upwards to begin swimming. None of these methods worked. I could not swim no matter what I did. I did not have the instinct necessary for swimming.

So the evidence had begun to accumulate. I was dyspraxic, clumsy, couldn't swim, didn't have the same perception of words as other people, seemed to be mostly asexual, preferred reading books to social interaction, couldn't catch a tennis ball even when given fair warning that one was being thrown at me. By then I was pretty sure that all of this was connected and I was beginning to suspect that I had petit mal epilepsy as well because there were some odd things which had happened and the subjective experience of them didn't make any sense. Epileptic fits would account for the gaps in my perception of these events. Of course, I was also being hypnotised by a pseudo-religious cult and that didn't help me to figure it all out. The group leaders in the Emin, as the cult was called, were teaching us to use words in other strange meanings and arrangements and that was on top of the difficulty which I would have had in any case.

As I look back on it after all these years I know that my entire life experience is of being a different type of human than the majority. These days we have the classification "autism" and that classification is helpful in some ways but misleading in others.

Why do "neurotypicals" and also some neuro -not so typical- people play the game of impressing each other by showing that they know the "right" word or phrase to imply the "right" meaning in any given context? Why does that come naturally to them and doesn't come naturally to me?

As near as I can figure it out it seems to be a sort of instinctive behaviour like an animal puffing itself up to appear bigger either as a threat to an attacker or as a courtship display to a potential mate. It seems that neurotypical humans use connotational speech as a way of establishing that they are "the people who know" and that we lesser beings are the outsiders. We are "the people who don't know". And that divide between the "knows" and the "don't knows" seems to be found throughout the present day world of human civilisations. Speaking as one of the "don't knows" who has studied the anthropology of "the people who know" for many years I can say that I have gathered a great deal of knowledge about the "people who know" and ironically I am still not one of them. I still look at the world of the "knowers" from the outside.

Oh, I can fake it. I can dress up in their cultural costumes and drop the same words and phrases that I've heard them use in the same context where they would use them. I went to university for three years and got an honours degree in fine art. I had to know some things for that. I had to work and develop concepts and know what an image is and what it is not. So I did the work and got the degree.

I still feel like an outsider though. I'm still an asshole anthropologist crouching in the bushes outside the world of modern day humans observing their ritual behaviour, their totems and their taboos.

I try to make some sort of virtue out of knowing that I don't know much. Are there other people like me? Did fools like me exist in history? Were they village idiots? Were they court jesters? Were they those individuals who become famous but never quite fit in? Like John Lennon for instance.

Anyway, I do know how to write and draw. And I have a quite nice life in my old age. So I can't complain.